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CIA Read Mail of Nixon, Other Notables

By Norman Kempster
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The CIA opened and copied the mail of former President Richard M. Nixon and a wide variety of other individuals including Federal Reserve Board Chairman Arthur F. Burns and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, members of the Senate Intelligence Committee disclosed today.

Committee chairman Frank Church, D-Idaho, said the mail of the Ford Foundation, Harvard University, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta King, Rep. Bella Abzug, D-N.Y., Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey and former West Virginia Secretary of State Jay Rockefeller was also intercepted and opened by the CIA.

Church added in reference to himself, "Even the chairman of this committee, whose letter to my mother is in the file."

LATER, SEN. Walter Mondale, D-Minn., added the names of Nobel Prize winning scientist Linus Pauling, author John Steinbeck and United Auto Workers official Victor Reuther to the list of individuals whose mail was marked for opening.

A committee aide said that only one of Nixon's letters was opened — one dated on June 1, 1968, when he was the leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination.

The revelations came while James J. Angleton, former CIA chief of counterintelligence, was testifying on the details of the Nixon administration's 1970 so-called "Huston Plan" which included an authorization of mail opening.

"Why were Frank Church and Richard Nixon on that list?" Sen. Howard Baker, R-Tenn., asked Angleton.

"I would say it was very much an error," Angleton responded.

STATEW MINUTES earlier Mondale, concerning Pauling, Steinbeck and Reuther, "what counterintelligence objective was it you thought you were achieving in opening the mail of what most of us would think were thoughtful and loyal Americans?"

"I would rather answer that in executive session," Angleton responded.

Then after a whispered conference with his attorney, Angleton said a public answer of the question would disclose classified information and besides, he said, he would not wish to rely on his memory without reviewing CIA files.

The CIA mail-opening program was authorized in 1952 but did not actually begin until two years later. It ended in February 1973 at the orders of then-CIA Director James Schlesinger.

The program, which concentrated on mail to and from the Soviet Union and other Communist countries, was disclosed earlier this year in the report of the Rockefeller Commission which investigated the CIA. But the names of the individuals whose mail had been opened had not been made public previously.

The mail-opening program continued in spite of the brief flurry of activity that surrounded the Huston Plan. In July 1970 Nixon authorized a series of illegal activities, including mail opening, in an effort to counter often-violent revolutionary groups. The program was canceled five days later.

CHURCH SAID there was no evidence that Nixon had ever been informed of any of the details of the mail opening program.

The 43-page report of a special committee which led to adoption of the Huston Plan said, in fact, that mail opening "has been discontinued."

"What possible justification was there to misrepresent a matter of such importance to the commander-in-chief?" Church demanded.

"I would say your question is very poorly put, Mr. Chairman," Angleton responded.

Angleton added that it would have been difficult to discuss the mail opening program in an inter-agency committee which included representatives of organizations other than the CIA.

"I don't think anyone would have hesitated to inform the President if he at any moment had asked for a review of intelligence," Angleton said.

"But that is what he did do," Church responded. "He asked Huston for a report."

"I was referring to a much more restricted view," Angleton said.

CHURCH SAID that when Nixon revoked the Huston Plan "the CIA didn't pay any attention to him."

"I have no satisfactory answer to that at all," Angleton said.

"So the commander-in-chief isn't commander-in-chief at all," Church said. "He is just a problem."

In answer to Mondale's questions Angleton said the mail opening clearly "was illegal."

But Angleton said the nation's counterintelligence forces needed "to know everything about contacts of Americans with Communist countries."

Angleton said he believed that the Soviets thought U.S. mails would not be compromised, therefore they might pass important secrets through normal channels.

"Do you believe national security cannot be protected without the sacrifice of these (individual) rights?" Mondale demanded.

Angleton responded that counterintelligence programs "require considerable latitude."